United Nations A/54/117

General Assembly

Distr.: General
2 June 1999

Original: English

Fifty-fourth session
Item 121 of the preliminary list*
Programme planning

Ways in which the full implementation and the quality of mandated programmes and activities could be ensured and could be better assessed by and reported to Member States

Report of the Secretary-General

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* A/54/50.

99-16102 (E) 030699

I. Introduction

1. At its fifty-third session, the General Assembly, in its resolution 53/207 (V) of 18 December 1998, requested the Secretary-General to submit proposals for consideration by the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) at its thirty-ninth session on ways in which the full implementation and the quality of mandated programmes and activities could be ensured and could be better assessed and reported to Member States. The request was based on the discussion in CPC and the Fifth Committee on the programme performance of the United Nations for the biennium 1996–1997 during which the view was expressed that the methodology for reporting programme performance no longer met the needs of the Organization. It was stressed that the work of the United Nations, and its success in implementing mandates, could be derived through a more qualitative analysis of programme performance only.[1] The Committee concluded that in future performance reports, more emphasis should be placed on qualitative analysis to reflect achievements in implementing programme activities.[2]

2. In recent years, Member States, intergovernmental and expert bodies, in particular CPC and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, have repeatedly expressed the need for better assessment of the quality of implemented programmes. In order to begin any serious discussion on the possible ways to achieve a more qualitative analysis of programme performance in the future, it is important to recognize that there are internal weaknesses in the current programme planning process which render the qualitative assessment of programme outputs nearly impossible. Member States have pointed out that the present programme performance monitoring process is mainly a quantitative exercise which does not provide adequate information on the quality and usefulness of the implemented outputs. They have also pointed out that the effectiveness of programme monitoring was directly related to the quality of the medium-term plan and the programme budget.

3. Monitoring of programme performance is one of the four instruments of an integrated management process that were adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 37/234 of 21 December 1982. Put succinctly, a medium-term plan that translates legislative mandates into programmes, with objectives and strategies derived from the policy orientations and goals set by the intergovernmental organs, is adopted by the Assembly, and serves as the framework for the formulation of the biennial programme budget. The ability to assess the quality of programme performance is therefore dependent upon the quality of medium-term planning and programme budgeting. To the extent that programme proposals indicated in the medium-term plan and the programme budget express measurable, time-limited objectives and describe intended outcomes, the quality of implemented programmes can be assessed in terms of whether or not the objectives were met.

4. The Secretary-General monitors the delivery of output scheduled in the approved programme budget and, after the completion of the biennial budget period, reports to the General Assembly, through CPC, on programme performance during that period. The relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the Organization's activities are then evaluated. Each of the four instruments corresponds to one phase in a programme planning cycle and consequently shall serve as a framework for the subsequent phases, with programme performance monitoring providing guidance to the formulation of programme budgets, and programme evaluation linked to the formulation of medium-term plans.

5. As expressed in the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programming Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation, the purpose of the instruments is "to ensure that activities are coordinated and that available resources are utilized according to legislative intent and in the most effective and economic manner"(regulation 2.2). They are expected to be used by the Secretary-General in order to manage effectively, and by the intergovernmental bodies to ensure the Secretariat's accountability.

6. The report on programme performance provides the intergovernmental bodies responsible for overseeing the programmes of the United Nations, starting with CPC, with information that will allow those bodies to ensure that the resources provided by the Member States are utilized according to legislative intent and in the most effective and economic manner.

7. The current methodology used in the report is the result of discussions of the methodology for monitoring and reporting of the programme performance of the United Nations at the forty-sixth session of the General Assembly. As explained in the report of the Secretary-General entitled "Methodology for monitoring and reporting the programme performance of the United Nations" (A/46/173), it is intended to serve two purposes. The first is to report to Member States on the degree of implementation of the activities indicated in the programme budget. For this purpose, the output actually produced within a biennium is compared with that which was programmed. The comparison is essentially quantitative in nature, with outputs placed in broad categories by type and the ratios between output

produced as against output programmed shown for different programmes. An effort has been made to examine the use of resources by computing the work-months that have been used in the preparation of outputs.

8. The second purpose is to provide an analysis of the changes that occur during the implementation of the activities outlined in the programme budget as adopted by the General Assembly. This analysis is also quantitative and shows the deviations that have occurred during the programme implementation period (for example, categories of outputs added at the initiative of legislative bodies, and those added at the initiative of the Secretariat as well as those reformulated, postponed or terminated).

9. As the third instrument in the programme planning cycle, programme performance monitoring has been dependent on the implementation of the prior medium-term planning and programme budgeting instruments. Outputs have been the focus because they are the measurable programme components of the programme budget.

10. The report of the Secretary-General on programme performance of the United Nations for the biennium 1996–1997 (A/53/122 and Add.1) states that the reporting on programme performance provides only a quantitative picture of the status and pattern of output delivery. The findings suggest that monitoring programme performance can confirm delivery, explain the changes in the pattern of implementation and detect problems by identifying anomalies with respect to both past actions or general patterns. Such reporting does not assess the quality or relevancy of the outputs produced and cannot tell whether the objectives set out in the medium-term plan have been met. That would require an analysis of outcomes rather than outputs. These limitations are intrinsic to the exercise and can be overcome only through fundamental changes in the conception of programming and budgeting and, indeed, of monitoring (para. 64).

II. Possible qualitative measures

11. The limitations of the quantitative methodology have led the Committee to request a methodology that would also indicate the quality of the programme performance. Several considerations need to be taken into account at the outset to determine how this can be done.

12. First, the United Nations provides different categories of services and outputs. Some of them are provided directly to Member States in the form of conference services (interpretation, translated documents) or the parliamentary documentation required by Main Committees (for example, the programme budget). The quality of these services may be assessed in terms of the timeliness and provision of requested information, in the case of reports, and in terms of the accuracy, delivery and knowledge of official languages, in the case of interpretation and translation. However, there are certain activities and outputs that do not easily lend themselves to qualitative assessment. These outputs are typically indirect and intended to advance an intergovernmental process (for example, through analytical reports discussed at meetings) or to provide assistance to individual Governments (through technical cooperation or the provision of information).

13. Second, for many of the services provided by the United Nations, there are areas where there is no competition for the reason that the nature of their mandate is exclusive to the United Nations. With the exception of some services like printing or information technology services, it is difficult to compare United Nations service delivery with those of a similar institution to determine relative quality of performance.

14. As a result of these considerations, most of the performance enhancing strategies, and the related qualitative measures of performance described in the literature on "reinventing government", are not easily applicable to the United Nations. The issue of qualitative measures, therefore, needs to be approached from the perspective of an international organization with unique characteristics as a public institution.

A. Relationship of outputs to outcomes

15. A starting point for examining qualitative measures is in terms of the nature of United Nations activities relative to the objectives being sought. Within the broad purposes of the Organization, specific objectives are defined in terms of future conditions that need to be achieved and can be described. To achieve these objectives, certain behavioural changes, or outcomes, need to be obtained. In order to provoke these outcomes, the United Nations produces outputs by using inputs and undertaking activities.

16. In this process, only the conversion of inputs into outputs is within the control of the Secretariat. Outcomes are usually the result of a number of factors, only one of which is the output produced by the Secretariat. In that sense, the relationship between an output and an outcome is probabilistic. Producing the output should increase the likelihood that the outcome is obtained, but cannot guarantee this.

17. As an example, one of the goals being pursued in the area of climate change is to reduce the global warming. The objective sought here might be, *inter alia*, to achieve an international convention or protocol that reduces emissions of greenhouse gases. For this to be achieved, States have to agree on how to deal with the issue of emissions trading. Achieving a consensus on the mechanism for emissions trading is an outcome relative to the objective being sought. Outputs intended to affect this outcome might include preparing Secretariat reports on alternative mechanisms for emissions trading, or on the economic consequences of emissions trading, or servicing an expert group on the subject. The secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (A/AC.237/18 (Part II)/Add.1 and Corr.1, annex I) receives resources to hire staff or consultants and pay for travel of experts to produce the reports or convene the expert group meetings.

18. In regard to the example, the mere production of the reports or convening of the expert group meetings would not guarantee that States agreed on a mechanism for emissions trading. Other factors outside the purview of the secretariat could intervene, such as changes in the global economic situation or a sudden change in weather patterns. However, by helping to structure the agenda, by maintaining an institutional memory about the course of previous negotiations, by presenting differing State positions in a politically neutral way, by mobilizing factual information credibly and by facilitating inter-State negotiation, all of which are secretariat outputs, the secretariat would have increased the probability of agreement. That outcome is the concrete product of the output for which resources were expended.

19. In this context, the quality of an output can be judged in terms of the outcome to which it contributes. Quality is a characteristic of something. Good quality is a characteristic that distinguishes something from similar things and makes it better or superior or more worthwhile. Unfortunately, there is no absolute standard for good quality. Quality is always relative. Thus, an output that fails to provoke the desired outcome might not be considered of good quality even if it was considered to be technically proficient, well drafted or informative.

20. It follows that judgements of quality are inevitably made by consumers, who make the necessary comparisons, rather than producers. In terms of programmes delivering services, these are most appropriately the beneficiaries of these services. It is for this reason that much of programme performance appraisal at the national level is based on responses of the client or the constituent population for the programme. For the United Nations, the most obvious beneficiaries are Governments and the general public concerned with the specific issues that the programmes are designed to address. These entities are represented in the functional bodies that are expected to review and guide each programme. The judgements of these specialized bodies on their respective programmes could be held to indicate quality, but this would be the case only if those bodies reviewed the output produced by the programmes in terms of their intended outcomes. At present, this is not done. Rather, future programmes of work are reviewed but not necessarily in the context of past performance.

21. If this logic is accepted, the focus of qualitative analysis of programme performance has to be on the relationship between outputs and outcomes and achievements, particularly as seen by the beneficiaries of the programmes. The first step in this process has to be formulating the objectives for each subprogramme so that they focus on what could be accomplished within the programme budget period, aimed at meeting certain needs of identified end-users within a given period of time. There would also need to be an indication of the desired outcomes involving benefits to end-users, to be reached through the delivery of outputs and leading to the fulfilment of the subprogramme objective. It will be noted that the revised Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation require that programme narratives set out subprogrammes, objectives, outputs and expected accomplishments.

B. A first approach to qualitative performance measures

22. The current programme performance monitoring system is based on classifying the output produced using essentially two types of descriptors. The first type is in terms of the gross output, based on its status and whether it is a final (parliamentary services, published material, information materials and services, advisory services, training courses/seminars/workshops) or an intermediate (coordination, harmonization and liaison or international cooperation) output. The second type of description identifies whether the output was programmed in the budget originally or has been added subsequently.

23. This classification scheme indicates what the output is, but not what it does. For example, parliamentary documentation (in the form of reports to intergovernmental bodies) can comprise active documents — such as a report on alternative mechanisms for emissions trading, as

indicated earlier — intended to help advance an intergovernmental negotiation. It can also encompass reports whose only purpose is to provide information for monitoring purposes (such as the programme performance monitoring report itself) or reports — such as the periodic reports on the monitoring of different types of programmes — whose only purpose is to place before an intergovernmental body reliable information on which discussions may be based.

24. As the programme performance monitoring system has matured and sought to capture the diversity of activities performed by the Secretariat, there are now many activities reported that do not, in fact, produce any outputs or at least they are not observable. These include what has been termed intermediate outputs. The reporting of activities such as "coordination" and "harmonization" reflects the fact that those activities must be performed if outcomes are to be achieved. However, in the absence of a link with their outcomes, it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of these otherwise elusive activities.

25. The existing classification system does not, therefore, permit the establishment of a connection between outputs and outcomes, since the relationship is not built into the classification scheme for outputs. Finding a way to describe that relationship would be a step towards including a qualitative dimension in the programme performance monitoring system.

III. Timing and assessment to improve implementation of programmes

26. As it stands today, the programme performance monitoring report, rather than serve as an aid to programme analysis and accountability, essentially provides a historical perspective. The report on a given biennium is expected to be issued within three months of the conclusion of the biennium. This is, however, far too late to affect the review of the next budget, which would have been reviewed six months before the end of the biennium and approved four months before the programme performance report was issued. This is also far too early to affect the drafting of the next medium-term plan, since the report covers only the first biennium of the plan period.

27. The main current legislative function that the report can perform is to alert CPC that the new programme budget contains a number of carry-overs and that the previous budget involved the addition of outputs. Were the information contained in the programme performance report available to the Committee at the time the Secretary-General's programme budget proposals were reviewed, Member States would be able to query programme managers about their performance and relate this to the next budget. Even under the existing methodology, it would permit identifying those programme managers who were unable to deliver their programmed outputs on schedule, or who had been required to make major modifications. It would, at a minimum, lead to a tightening of programming by Secretariat managers.

28. If qualitative reporting was to be added based on the relationship between outputs and outcomes, a critical dialogue between Member States and programme managers could be developed. This would permit CPC to perform its oversight function with greater effectiveness and ensure the accountability of managers for their use of resources.

IV. Conclusions: options for improving assessment of the quality of programme performance

29. There are a number of options available to improve the methodology through which the full implementation and the quality of mandated programmes and activities could be ensured and could be better assessed and reported to Member States. Proposed below are three options which are not in any way mutually exclusive.

30. A first option would be to mandate the specialized intergovernmental bodies that oversee each programme with the responsibility for making judgements about the quality of programme performance. This would imply that sections of the programme performance reports would be made available to those bodies much in the same way as programme narratives of the programme budget proposals are made available. A summary of the findings of the bodies could then be made available to CPC in the context of its review of the programme performance report. This option would have the advantage of adding an assessment of programme performance from the perspective of the main beneficiaries, a significant qualitative dimension. While it would add an additional step to the current process, it would be very useful if it was to be linked to the review of programme budget proposals. The programme performance report would need to be prepared earlier, and the timing of the session of CPC might have to be adjusted, so as to allow the specialized intergovernmental bodies, most of which meet between January and May, to review the report.

31. A second option, designed to address the utility of the programme performance report, would be to change its

timing so that it could be presented as part of the review of the programme budget proposals, both by the specialized intergovernmental bodies and by the Committee itself. This would mean that the report would have to be produced approximately a year earlier than is currently the case, so that it could be used as part of the review exercise. This would also mean that the report would cover the first 12 months of the current biennium, plus the last 12 months of the previous biennium. Such an arrangement would have the advantage of supplying the report with a strong function through its use in helping to ensure accountability of programme managers for delivery on current programmes when they made their proposals for the future. It would require that programme budgets specify, for each activity, the year in which it was to be undertaken. The programme budget for 1998–1999 already indicates, for many activities, in which year of the biennium they are scheduled for implementation.

32. This option has the disadvantage of not exactly matching the biennium structure of the programme. It should be noted, however, that even the current programme performance report does not exactly match the biennium structure. Resource calculations clearly straddle bienniums, since the work on a given output very frequently begins in the previous biennium. However, if note is made of the biennium in which the output was produced, a computation of programme performance for any given biennium could be prepared, if necessary.

33. As noted in paragraph 3 above, the quality of performance reporting depends itself on the quality of medium-term planning and programme budgeting. If programme proposals are presented along with measurable, time-limited objectives, including a description of the intended outcomes, it will be easier to assess the quality of programmes implemented by examining whether the objectives of the programmes have been met or the outcomes obtained. In most cases, objectives in the current plans and programme budgets are expressed rather too vaguely to be measured. Often they are not stated as objectives at all, but rather as activities. For example, many objectives begin with the verb "assist" which signifies more an activity than an objective. In fact, the outcome of the activity of "assisting" something would be the objective rather than the activity itself.

34. The current planning approach and programme budget do not require programme managers to specify the intended outcomes that they expect their outputs to produce. In the absence of a clear sense of where a programme is going, it is not possible to determine whether it has arrived at its destination. A third option, therefore, would be to seek to relate outputs to outcomes in the programme performance report. As discussed in the preceding paragraphs, this would require programme managers, as part of their preparation of programme budget proposals, to specify the outcomes a subprogramme is expected to accomplish, and to identify the outputs required to achieve those outcomes. For example, if a report to an intergovernmental body was intended to achieve a new agreement on an issue during the biennium, this would be specified. Although the report in itself does not guarantee that a new agreement on the issue will be reached, it increases the likelihood of an agreement. In this case, therefore, the quality of the report or output would then be determined or judged in terms of whether an agreement had been in fact reached by the Member States on the issue presented in the report.

35. The main advantages of this approach would be to give a programme-specific basis for judging quality and would require programme managers to be specific about what they intended to accomplish with their resources during a given biennium. The main disadvantage would be an increase in the details to be included in the programme budget as well as in the details that would have to be reported in the programme performance report. However, if that degree of detail was to be used as part of the programme budget review process, it might well be a worthwhile investment for the Organization, since it would help Member States to identify the extent to which programmes had attained their objectives.

36. To a large extent, the third option would be contingent upon the adoption of an approach to budgeting that specified intended outcomes in advance. It would also be contingent upon an improved description of objectives in measurable terms, that is to say, of what was expected to be achieved at the end of the plan period. Within the objectives, groups of intended outcomes could be specified and within each group of outcomes, the outputs that were expected to produce the outcome could also be specified. The achievements or accomplishments at the end of the biennium need to be linked to clearly stated, measurable objectives in the medium-term plan as well as to the programme outputs produced. Programme managers therefore need to design a logical framework within which the expected outcomes are embedded. Ideally, this would be part of the printed and approved programme budget, should that approach be agreed. It could be done just as well as an internal exercise within the Secretariat by simply grouping the outputs not in terms of type, but in terms of outcome. For example, instead of presenting all parliamentary services as a block, they should be presented in terms of the outcomes that the outputs, ranging from parliamentary services through

publications to coordination, are intended to produce. This third option would require changes in the way planning, programming and monitoring rules and regulations are currently being implemented within the Organization.

V. Recommendations

37. The three options are not mutually exclusive. Although any or all of them could be adopted, they differ in terms of when they could be implemented. Option one could be adopted beginning with the programme performance monitoring report on the programme budget for the biennium 1998–1999 and would only require the General Assembly's request that sections of the report be reviewed by the competent specialized intergovernmental bodies and that the results of their review be reported to the Committee when it took up the report. Additionally, to enhance the qualitative content of the programme performance report for the period 1998–1999, departments and offices would be required to provide overviews that not merely provided descriptions, but also listed the achievements from activities and outputs, and indicated how lessons learned would enhance the usefulness of future programme activities. Further explanations with regard to terminated outputs, and their relative priority within the subprogrammes, would also need to be included (para. 30).

38. Option two is contingent upon changing the timing of the monitoring report, which would have to be issued to correspond with the review of programme budget proposals, some six months prior to the completion of the biennium. This could be done at the earliest for the programme budget proposals for the biennium 2002–2003, which would be reviewed in the year 2001 (paras. 31–33).

39. Option three is contingent on adoption of planning and programme budgeting methods that permit the identification in precise terms of expected outcomes. This could begin with the programme budget for the biennium 2002–2003, the framework for which would be the precise objectives set forth in the medium-term plan for the period 2002–2005 (paras. 34–36).

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 16* (A/53/16), part one, para. 29.

[2] Ibid., para. 33.